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THE PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Early Legislative History

Although there were expressions in state law for a state-wide school system, it was not until 1834 that a general school law was adopted. For example, in 1683 the General Assembly of the Colony of Pennsylvania passed an act in the Frame of Government which expressed the ideal that all children should be taught to read and write by the age of 12.

In 1790 the Constitution of Pennsylvania was amended to require the legislature to adopt a law for the establishment of schools in the state including free schooling for the poor.

In 1809 the legislature passed a law to require each county to provide free education for “all children between five and 12 years of age, and whose parents were unable to pay for their schooling.” Most parents, however, refused to declare themselves “paupers” to obtain an education for their children and the law was considered unsuccessful in reaching poorer households.

In the early 1800's education was largely for children whose families could pay for it. At least 4,000 schoolhouses were built in the Commonwealth through volunteer or church efforts. Parents paid a “subscription” fee to maintain the schoolhouse and teacher.

In 1834 the Free School Act was adopted. It encouraged the establishment of a free school system in each community. The school system was to be supported by local taxes supplemented by state support. The law was optional, however, and three Luzerne County Townships, Hanover, Newport and Nescopeck, elected to reject the Free School Act and these three “non-accepting” towns had to maintain schools without state support.

The Free School Act of 1834 was very controversial. Several religious dominations opposed the act because the free school system would disrupt the tradition of religious-bases schools. Many schools in the state were taught in the German language and the Free School Act was viewed as a threat to the German heritage. Others argued that free education of the people was dangerous as “free schools would furnish the hot-beds wherein idle drones too lazy for honest labor would be reared and maintained.”

Administration

Under the early school laws each county had two inspectors of common schools appointed by the county court. The schools were supervised by the Department of State in Harrisburg. In 1957 the Department of Public Instruction was created. There was a State Superintendent of Common Schools which was changed in 1873 to a Superintendent of Public Instruction.

A system for county superintendent, elected by local school directors, was created in 1854. The first Luzerne County school superintendent was John W. Lescher whose salary was \$500.00. By 1867 cities and boroughs had their own superintendent. By 1870 the “non-accepting” school districts were also swept under the Free School Act of 1834.

The early school laws, however, did not require compulsory attendance. The first compulsory school law was adopted in 1895 and applied to children eight to 13. In 1897 the law was extended to children to age 16.

Under the Free Act of 1834 the minimum school term was three months. The term was extended to four months in 1849, but the extended term was so controversial it was repealed in 1851. The four month term was reinstated in 1854. In 1899 the minimum term was extended to seven months.

The Early Schools

Most of the early Pennsylvania schoolhouses consisted of one-room and were built of logs. They were crude, uncomfortable, and poorly lighted and heated. In many cases the one-teacher schools were ungraded.

Teacher salaries were low. The very early teachers received \$10.00 or \$12.00 a month. The teacher “boarded around” and often received food and commodities in lieu of pay. The first minimum wage law was not passed until 1903. Salaries were than at least \$35.00 a month.

The school laws of Pennsylvania from 1864 to 1895 prohibited boards of school directors to spend funds for library books except for teachers.

The early curriculum included reading and arithmetic. In some school girls were not given instruction in handwriting as the subject was not viewed as having practical value for them. Gradually, composition and grammar were common subjects.

In 1885 instruction in physiology and hygiene was required with special reference to the effect of “alcoholic drinks, stimulants, and narcotics” upon the human system. Education for the blind was provided by law in 1911. Safety education was established in 1921 along with the teaching of music and art. Special state aid for the mentally and physically handicapped was created in 1925.

Many early schools had only one teacher. In certain areas of the state the children came from

families working for the timbering industry. As the trees were removed, and the lumber industry declined, the school population decreased. The smaller schools were becoming expensive to operate. By the turn of the century, consolidation of schools would become necessary.

Many students in early schools could not afford the cost of schoolbooks. In 1885 a state law was passed to aid school districts in the purchase of school books for poor children. But, the law was optional with local schools. Finally, in 1893 the “free textbook law” was made compulsory.

The high school system came later. In 1860 there were only six public high schools in the state. Secondary education was largely the function of private academies until the state legislature passed laws in 1887-1895 authorizing the creation of high schools.

Teacher Education and Normal Schools

When the Free School Act of 1834 was adopted, most teachers were simply men and women who had completed the upper grades of the common schools. The existing colleges and private academies in the state did not meet the demand for teachers created by the Free School Act of 1834. The 1834 law granted school district inspectors the authority to issue teachers’ certificates if the applicant was qualified to teach “reading, writing and arithmetic.”

The Normal School Act of 1857 encouraged the development of private teacher or “Normal” schools. Eventually, there were 14 schools created. Several Lake Township teachers went to Bloomsburg Normal School which was created in 1871. The state began to financially support the Normal schools in 1861. In 1911 the state purchased the Normal School system for \$1,600,000.00. They became the State Teaches College system in 1926 and their functions enlarged as four year institutions.

School Consolidation and Transportation

There were critics of the one-teacher rural schools who believed that children in upgraded schools did not progress as well as students in graded schools. In some sections of the state rural children had a higher failure rate when they attended high school. Teachers were also becoming difficult to attract to rural schools.

The one-room schoolhouses were inadequate and textbooks dated. Library material and supplementary readers were absent or selected without proper consideration. Sanitary facilities were in deplorable condition in many schools.

Many of these concerns, however, did not apply to Lake Township. Qualified graduates of the Lake schools returned as gifted teachers to the rural schools of Lake Township. But, it is true that many of the Lake schoolhouses were 50 years old by 1900, and consolidation of schools had advantages.

At the turn of the century roads and transportation in rural areas were slowly to improve. The state encouraged change in the rural districts.

In 1897 school districts were authorized to close and consolidate the smaller rural schools. In 1919 the law required school districts to close one-teacher schools having an average term attendance of 10 or less. In 1926-27 there were 486 one-teacher schools in the state which was reduced to 237 by 1933-34. The state encouraged these closings by subsidizing the cost of transporting children of closed schools.